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The 10 Commandments of Writing



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The Ten Commandments of Writing

Good, clear writing is hard to find in the business world. Powerful, exciting prose is even rarer. How can you help the members of your team achieve it?

Unlike the latest dot.com business model, good writing fundamentals are not will-o'-the-wisps. Following are ten of the most basic rules of the road to keep in mind—and to share with your team.

Thou shall champion the verb, holding no other parts of speech before it.

The verb is indeed your god. Verbs make sentences sing. Without them, sentences lie inert on the page like black-eyed Susans after a sudden shower.

Thou shall keep thy verbs both active and short.

If you let them, verbs can smack, pound, writhe, and bludgeon their way into your reader's consciousness. Longer verbs, like elongate, gain a little in elegance but lose immeasurably in punch. Don't elongate your sentences with long, pompous verbs—or long, pompous words of any kind. As someone once said, eschew obfuscation. Keep it simple. Moreover, avoid passive verb constructions whenever possible. Passive constructions lead to confusion in the reader's mind because we always look for the actor and the action first when we read. If you say, "The following course of action was decided upon," you leave the reader first wondering who decided to take action, and second what the action was. That's the way our minds work, so give it to us that way in print.

Thou shall always prefer organizational clarity over cheap effect.

You write to communicate with others. Because other people can't read your mind, you are obligated to make your intentions as clear as possible. Avoid fancy rhetorical devices. Leave the underlining, the italics, and the exclamation points to Tom Wolfe. Always start with the phrase "I am writing for one main reason. It is because...." Then delete that phrase and begin with your text. It should state cleanly and simply in a sentence or two the essence of the point you are trying to make.

Thou shall make the hierarchy of thy thought clear.

By using words that connect, list, rank, and highlight, you can help the reader through your text. For example, first you might ask a question of your reader. Then, you might answer the question raised. If you wish to enumerate a number of points, use "first," "second," "third," and the like to help your reader know where he is in the steps of your argument. A phrase like "on the one hand" leads the reader to expect "on the other hand" and sets up a flow of language that is easy to follow. Words like "moreover," "in addition," and "if...then" similarly help the reader understand the logical relationship of the sentences and paragraphs in your argument.

Thou shall speak in thine own voice.

Writers often encounter problems because they are trying to follow one particular set of rules. Try to forget all those half-remembered rules learned in high school or those notions about style picked up in a college composition course. Begin by writing the way you would speak. Then go back and edit to fix the logic and word choice. Writing that is direct and conversational is more likely to sound real and human than any attempt to write according to partially recalled dicta from teachers of yore.

Thou shall read the masters in order to learn to write better.

It's an unfortunate fact that writing skills have declined in this visual age, when we are more likely to have seen the movie than read the book. But the movie is the enemy of the book. Great movie moments—Casablanca excepted—are almost all visual; it is the nature of the medium. There are no great writing moments that are solely visual. In order to write well, we must read. And more than just trash fiction. Reading Michael Crichton will not stimulate good writing. We need to read Orwell, Shaw, Donne-and the Old Testament. Not to mention Joseph Conrad, Lawrence Durrell, Toni Morrison, and Jeanette Winterson. If you wish to write well, you must join the ranks of the literate. Turn off the television, skip the next showing of *The Perfect Storm*, and pick up a good book.

Thou shall write when it counts—and when a face-to-face meeting won't do

The clearest form of communication is the face-to-face meeting. All parties have the opportunity to check to see if they have understood. This feedback loop is essential for full confidence in two-way communications. Writing lacks the loop, and as such you should only use it with caution. Matters of record of course must find written form. Some highly contentious and emotional topics are best broached in print, in order to ensure that all arguments are fairly and fully expressed. When large numbers of people need to be included, it is simply not efficient to speak to everyone involved. Whatever the reason, the point is to think through the communication problem and pick the appropriate channel. Writing will only sometimes work best.

Thou shall never be bureaucratic when thou canst be human.

A good test of business writing is to take it home and read it to your 12-year-old. If you don't have one, hire one from the neighbors. If you have to explain too much about why you wrote the piece, it probably isn't either well thought out or well written. In fact, 12 may be too old. To borrow a line from a movie, explaining what you're trying to say as if you were telling it to a four-year-old is a good way to begin to write in the first place.

Thou shall avoid the noun phrase.

Writers pile noun upon noun, using them as adjectives to modify some original hapless noun long since lost in the shuffle. A communications expert once watched two highly paid consultants argue for half an hour about which phrase was better: "business re-engineering," or "business process re-engineering." When the expert was finally called in to adjudicate, he infuriated them both by suggesting that "re-engineering" had entered the popular lexicon and would do just fine. The other words were clearly redundant. What was re-engineering but about businesses? And what was business but about processes? As a general rule, anything that is quickly turned into an acronym (as in CRM for "customer relationship management") is probably a noun phrase and almost certainly an abomination that you should make your personal cause to stamp out.

Thou shall not forget to write passionately and to have fun.

Good writing creates joy in the heart of the reader. Bad writing creates headaches. And confusion. Lively metaphors bring sparkle to prose like diamonds on the Pope's headdress. Humor, when natural and appropriate, is the greatest gift of all, because it embodies the temporary triumph of humanity over our perennial shortcomings: death, taxes, and the Boston Red Sox. In the laughter that comes from the well-turned phrase, we can forget the pain of existence and celebrate its wonder, as, just for a moment, human order triumphs over inhuman chaos and the darkness that awaits us all.